[Mountain Farming]

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David M. Snelson and

Mrs. Otto Wells

Leicester, N. C.

Dairy farmers

Anne Winn Stevens, writer

Douglas Carter, reviser

MOUNTAIN FARMING AT ITS BEST Original Names Changed Names

David M. Snelson Brad Suttles

Mrs. Otto Wells Margaret Willis C9 - N.C. Box 1

MOUNTAIN FARMING AT ITS BEST

Farmers in the Worcester section agree that if anyone in that mountain region knows farming, it is Brad Suttles; but Brad is modest, and, when questioned, grins and says, “The first principle of farming is to learn how to fast.”

Brad, 52, stout, good-natured, and rudy-faced, seems to have fasted little, however. His graying hair is closely clipped, and when he laughs, which is often, he shows lower teeth conspicuously built up of gold. On the farm he wears dark blue denim work suits, but in town he dresses like the average business man. Since the death of his wife, Louise, his

clothes have been mended and kept in good trim by Margaret Willis, his widowed sister-in-law. Like most farmers “in these parts”, Brad keeps on his felt hat in the house.

There are two farms under Brad's management: one, known locally as the Suttles farm, was inherited by Brad's two children, John, 16, and Andrew, 10, from Andrew Perry, their grandfather, father of Margaret Willis and Louise Scuttles; the other, referred to as the Willis farm, was owned by 2 Burton Willis, deceased husband of Margaret, and was left to her for life, and upon her death to the Suttles children. Brad and Margaret are partners, after a fashion - the arrangement between them being informal - and it naturally falls to him to attend to the actual management of the farms, while she keeps house for the family. The farms are obviously prosperous, and Brad and Margaret are generally regarded as well-to-do, but neither will admit making more than a living. Modesty again. Brad is the legal guardian of his children, as well as their natural guardian, and therefore his participation in the arrangement, officially, is in their behalf. Periodically he is required to make detailed reports to the Superior Court on the administration of his ward's estate.

When Brad is asked about his education, he says laughingly, “After you talk to me awhile you'll know I ain't had much.” He loves to make informal speeches, though, and has a great deal of influence in local politics. His speeches invariably border on the humorous, and his listeners are always entertained while Brad is putting over the serious aspects of the subject. When matters of local interest are pending in the legislature, Brad often goes to the State capital as a lobbyist, sometimes appearing before the committees, out doing most of his work in the hotels and on the streets. This is strictly a side line with him, however. He has sought, and held, only one public office: he was a deputy sheriff for a short time. Primarily, and wholeheartedly, he is a farmer.

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Brad likes to talk of his early days. “My father,” he says, “was with Lee's army, and was wounded in the Seven Days' Battle around Richmond. After Lee's surrender, my father came back to the mountains, married, and settled down to farming his own land. When I

was two years old, he was killed in an accident at his sawmill. There were ten children, in the family, the youngest born after my father's death."

Brad's mother carried on with the farm, and Brad says, "There was two niggers living on the place who helped with the work during my father's life, but after he died they soon left, and my mother had no help except the children." Work, as Brad remembers it on the farm, was continuous. They got up at four o'clock in the morning and worked all day. In harvest time, after a hard day's work in the fields, stripping fodder, cutting corn tops, and gathering corn, they would shuck the corn by light of lantern until 10 o'clock at night. His mother kept cows, hogs and sheep. She washed wool from her own sheep, carded it, spun it, and wove cloth. Brad remembers that his first suit was made for him by his mother out of cloth which she had woven herself.

Schooling was desultory. "There was a Mrs. Abbott, a Presbyterian lady from Philadelphia," Brad says, "who taught in a one-room school in the neighborhood. The term ran from three to four months, but many of the children couldn't be 4 spared much from work on the farm, and got very little education." But as Mrs. Abbott boarded with the Suttles family, she often taught Brad at night. He was also taught at home by the wife of one of his older brothers.

"Young people today are not like when I was growing up," says Brad. "They don't have to work like we did. Imagine a boy working 14 hours a day now - every day! They don't think ahead any more, either, and it don't even seem like they care anything about owning their own homes. They don't think about anything but their pleasures, like rushing off to town to see a show. Now they can go more than 100 miles in the time it used to take us country people to go 10 miles when I was a boy. We never went anywhere, anyhow, but you ought to see 'em go now!" In his own youth, Brad contends, "There wasn't no amusements. The only recreation was Christmas and camp meeting."

His mother, he maintains, “had a remarkable memory. She would sometimes entertain us until 11 o'clock at night with stories of her young days. She was a good conversationalist. The trouble with most people today as conversationalists is they tell you so much that didn't happen.”

The 72-acre Suttles farm, which has belonged to direct descendants of the pioneer settler, John Richards, ever since he cleared and developed the tract, is almost all bottom land, and very fertile. It is remarkably level for a mountain farm indeed, it is quite flat. On the North and east is a sheltering range of low, wooded hills, which protects the valley like 5 a huge arm, curved defensively. Some of the spur ridges have treeless, grassy slopes, where the farm's herd of Guernsey cattle may often be seen grazing. At the base of one of these slopes are three weather-bleached tenant cabins. A paved highway forms the western boundary of the farm. From the highway, Graham Creek, a clear, shallow stream, meanders across the farm to return to the highway at the end of the fields. Near the house the stream is shaded by huge sycamores, and beyond the sycamores is an apple orchard.

The present farmhouse, built by Andrew Perry near the highway bridge over the creek, is a two-story structure of the Colonial type seen often in New England. Facing south toward the sycamores and the winding creek, it has a tall chimney at either end, and is framed and protected by a hill on the north. There is one immense boxwood near the small front porch. Between the house and the eastern ridges are the barns, silo, fields of oats already green, and land plowed for corn and peas. “When corn is 50¢ a bushel,” says Brad, “the only way to make it pay is to feed it to cows.”

The day I visited the farm, Margaret willis invited me into a large, high-ceilinged room with windows on three sides. There was an open fire, and through the windows were pleasant views of the wooded hill, gray with gnarled boughs of white oaks. From the back window could be seen a low ell, used as a kitchen, with the adjoining ground neatly flagged with

slabs of local stone. The rooms, simply furnished, is papered 6 inconspicuously in a design harmonious with the linoleum square on the floor.

Margaret, a slender figure in a neat blue cotton house dress and small apron, murmured an apology before finishing a table mat that she had been ironing. She placed it on one of the neat piles of freshly ironed articles on the couch, snapped off the electric iron, placed more wood on the fire, and seated herself in a rocker near the fireplace, her hands quiet and relaxed in her lap.

She is an alert, graceful woman of about fifty, with soft brown eyes and iron-gray hair parted in the middle and folded back from her forehead like wings. Her voice is soft and pleasant.

“I was born in this house,” she told me, “and spent my childhood here. John Richards, my ancestor, who settled this farm, lived in a small house by the hill.”

From her account, Burton, her husband, seems to have been ambitious and restless. He thought farming in the mountains was too slow, so, little more that a boy, he went to the West. His father, Deputy/ Sheriff Willis, was a well-to-do farmer, but there were many children to share his property. As Brad explains: “Thirty to forty years ago, when you could still get free land in the West, lots of young men went out there from these mountains. They wanted to own their own land, and settle where conditions were not so hard, and they could get 7 along faster.” Among them was Burton Willis, but after 16 years on the plains he came home to visit, and fell in love with slender, dark-eyed Margaret Perry. He wanted her to return to the West with him, where he had been engaged in raising cattle, but the prospect was not pleasing to Margaret, and he gave it up for her sake.

For several years the couple lived on a modest, shady street in the neighboring resort town, Burton having become a deputy sheriff, like his father. But he longed for the plains, and he felt that raising cattle should be his life work. Eventually, he talked Margaret into migrating to Canada, and they took up 160 acres of prairie land in Alberta, where they

lived six years. Margaret loved it. They raised Guernseys and planted wheat and oats. “All we had to do,” said Margaret, “was to put the seed in the ground and watch it grow. He made as much money there in one year as we did in six years of farming here. The big horses and the high-grade, up-to-date machinery helped to make the work easier. In the summer the cattle were pastured on the prairie, and in the winter they did not seem to mind the cold, as long as they had comfortable barns to sleep in. I have often seen the cattle come home in the afternoon with snow two or three inches deep on their backs.”

Into this prosperous adventure came the outbreak of the World War, followed by an unusually severe winter. Then 8 Burton developed rheumatism. Young Canadian ranchmen volunteered for military service and were sent to France. Food for the cattle could no longer be bought. In short, everything went wrong at once, and they were forced to sell out. The cattle were sold at a profit, but the land only brought $2,000. When they returned to their native State, Burton bought, for $4,000, [?] 84-acre farm near his wife's old home. When he was able, he bought more Guernseys, and took up stock farming. He died about 10 years ago.

Besides raising cattle for sale, Brad and Margaret keep from 21 to 25 milch cows on each farm. Tenant families, one to each farm, look after the cattle and do the milking, for which each family is paid $30 a month. For any work beyond that, each person is paid $1 a day. The tenants raise most of the feed for the cattle, and all of the vegetables for the Suttles-Willis household.

Brad and Margaret also own a tract of mountain pasture which is used for summer grazing. This tract has on it a large apple orchard, which is carefully cultivated by another tenant family. This family, in return for protecting the cattle during the summer and tending the orchard, is given the use of the cabin, the land near the cabin to cultivate for food, and half of the apples gathered.

The dairy barns and all equipment are regularly inspected by the health authorities, and are kept up to the highest 9 standards. The herd is tested three times a year for disease, and all milk produced must meet the requirements of the State laws before it can be sold. Milking begins at six o'clock in one morning, and the milk is collected by trucks at about nine. The entire production is sold to a creamery at the county seat. Brad and Margaret are very proud of the high quality of their milk, and call attention to its large butterfat content.

Margaret says, “The reason we don't make much more than a living out of our farms is that so much had to be done to the land. And in three years we lost 27 cows from Bang's disease. Taxes are heavy, too; partly because we border the main road for quite a ways.”

A flock of pure-bred Plymouth [?] is kept for home use, and Margaret each year cans all the fruit and vegetables needed through the winter. She is assisted in her household duties by an elderly nice-skirted woman, Mrs. Lowe, who has been with the family [?] years. Last summer they employed a girl as housemaid, but Margaret says, “The girl was always wanting to go places, and her work often had to be done over, so we get along just as well without her. After all, this is just a farmhouse, and I try to keep it simply furnished. That makes the housework lighter.”

They have electricity for lights and household conveniences, and their water is pumped from an approved well. And - they are thinking of installing a bathroom!